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On the attributes of a critical literature review

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Abstract

Exploring and evaluating findings from previous research is an essential aspect of all research projects enabling the work to be set in the context of what is known and what is not known. This necessitates a critical review of the literature in which existing research is discussed and evaluated, thereby contextualising and justifying the project. In this research note we consider what is understood by being critical when reviewing prior to outlining the key attributes of a critical literature review. We conclude with a summary checklist to help ensure a literature review is critical.

Keywords: literature review; critical; literature; review

Introduction

A thorough understanding of, and insight into, previous research that relates to a project is essential for the quality of the study, this usually being achieved by means of critically reviewing the extant literature. Yet, whilst much is written on the process of searching and recording the literature (for example: Hart, 1998), less is available regarding what makes a literature review critical. Notwithstanding excellent exceptions to this observation (for example the book by Wallace & Wray, 2011), the purpose of this research note is to offer clear guidance on the attributes of a critical literature review. We commence by outlining what is meant by being critical in the context of the literature review. We then outline and discuss what we consider are the key attributes of a critical literature review, concluding our note with a summary checklist.

Being critical

The significance of any research will, inevitably, be judged in relation to other people's research. All researchers therefore need to show they understand the context of their research: its key theories, concepts and ideas, and the major issues and debates about the research topic (Denyer & Tranfield, 2009). In doing this they are establishing what is already known about the topic and, if possible, identifying other research that is currently in progress. Their reading about others' research will have enhanced their

subject knowledge, helping them clarify further their research aim(s) and objective(s). Drawing on this reading they will have developed a clear written argument in their research publication about what the published literature indicates is known and not known about the topic (Wallace & Wray, 2011); including only that which is relevant. In other words, they will have critically reviewed the literature (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009).

The word ‘critical’, although widely used in academia, needs to be considered carefully within the context of the literature review. Fortunately, Mingers (2000) identifies four important aspects to a critical approach, which can be used to provide insights regarding what is meant by a critical literature review. These are:

- critique of rhetoric;
- critique of tradition;
- critique of authority;
- critique of objectivity.

The first, the ‘critique of rhetoric’, means appraising or evaluating a problem with effective use of language. In the context of our critical literature review, this emphasises the need to use our skills to make reasoned judgements and to argue effectively in writing. The other three aspects Mingers identifies also have implications for being critical when reviewing the work of others. They emphasise using evidence and ideas in the literature to help us question (where justification exists) the conventional wisdom, the ‘critique of tradition’ and the dominant view, the ‘critique of authority’. Finally, being critical in our review may also include recognition that the knowledge and information we are discussing are not value free, the ‘critique of objectivity’. Being critical in reviewing the literature is, therefore, a combination of our knowledge and understanding of what has been written, our evaluation and judgement skills and our ability to structure these clearly and logically in writing. To do this we need to be aware of the key attributes of the critical literature review. It is these which we now consider.

Attributes of a critical review

(1) Identifies and includes the most relevant and significant research to the topic

In considering the content of our critical review, we need to be aware of the key academic theories within our chosen topic that are pertinent to or contextualise our research. Whilst we should have read the literature that is closely related to our research aim(s) and objective(s), that which is less closely related is more likely to cause us problems (Gall, Gall & Borg, 2006). For some research topics, particularly new research areas, there is unlikely to be much closely related literature and so we will have to review more broadly. For other topics where research has been undertaken over a number of years we may be able to focus on more closely related literature (Saunders et al., 2009).

It is, however, impossible to review every single piece of the literature. Fortunately, the purpose of the literature review is not to provide a summary of everything that has been written on the research topic, but to review the most relevant and significant research relating to our topic. If our review is effective, clear gaps in what is known will be identified that have not been researched previously (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

Discussing and explaining these will provide the academic context for our research, also allowing us to show how our findings and theories relate to earlier research.

Assessing the relevance of the literature in relation to our research depends on our aim(s) and objective(s). Initially we will be looking for relevance to the topic, not critically assessing the ideas contained within. When doing this, it helps to have thought about criteria for assessing the relevance of each item of literature. In contrast, assessing the value of literature is concerned with its theoretical and methodological rigour (Hodgkinson, Herriot & Anderson, 2001). Where we think ideas, arguments or research findings reported are unclear, biased or inconsistent with other work and need to be researched further, we need to justify why. This is not easy and requires careful thought and clear argument.

(2) Discusses and evaluates research

A common mistake with critical literature reviews is that they become uncritical listings or catalogues of previous research (Saunders & Lewis, 2011). Often they are little more than annotated bibliographies (Hart, 1998), individual items being selected because they fit with what the researcher is proposing (Greenhalgh, 1997). It is, however, not the purpose of a critical review to just describe what each author has written, one author

after another. Rather, as we begin to read and evaluate the literature, we need to think how to combine the academic theories and ideas thematically to form the critical review. This review will need to evaluate research that has already been undertaken in the area of the study, show and explain the relationships between published research findings and reference the literature in which they were reported.

Sometimes we may be highly critical of the earlier research reported in the literature and seek to question or revise it through our research. However, we must still review this research, explain clearly why we consider it requires revision and justify our own ideas through clear argument and with reference to literature.

In discussing and evaluating the literature, the precise structure we use will depend on the research aim(s) and objective(s). It is helpful to think of our review as a thematic funnel in which we first provide a general overview of the key themes and ideas before narrowing down to our research aim(s) and objective(s). We then need to discuss each theme in turn comparing and contrasting what different authors say about them. As we compare and contrast researchers' findings about each theme, we are writing critically (Saunders & Lewis, 2011).

(3) Identifies recognised experts

As we have mentioned, it is impossible to read everything. Yet we need to be sure that the critical review discusses the key research already undertaken and that we have positioned our study clearly within the wider context. This will inevitably mean being able to identify the relevant and significant theories and recognised experts in relation to the topic. For some research topics there will be a pre-existing, clearly developed theoretical base. For others we will need to integrate a number of different theoretical strands to develop our understanding.

(4) Contextualises and justifies your aim(s) and objective(s)

Creswell (2007) highlights three ways in which researchers use the literature. Firstly, they use it to explicitly frame their research aim(s) in the initial stages of the research. Secondly, they use it to provide the context and theoretical framework for the research and, finally, to help place the research findings within the wider body of knowledge. For the purposes of the critical review, the second of these 'ways' is crucial. To

contextualise and justify our research aim(s) and objective(s), we need to integrate the different ideas from the literature to form a coherent and cohesive argument. However, it is worth remembering that the literature we read for our review should also inform our methodology, being referenced as appropriate. Similarly we will need to refer back to the literature when discussing our findings.

(5) Consider and discuss research that supports and opposes your ideas

Having identified research that is relevant to our study, we should be able to provide a reasonably detailed, constructively critical analysis of the key literature that relates to the aim(s) and objective(s). Within this we need to include research that corroborates our ideas, showing clear links from these supporting publications to the empirical work that will follow. It is also necessary to include and discuss research that is counter to our opinions. This is crucial to provide readers with a comprehensive picture of the extant literature. Indeed, within the critical review, we need to juxtapose different authors' ideas and form our own views based on these (Saunders et al., 2009).

(6) Justifies points made logically with valid evidence

When reviewing critically, an important aspect to consider is how convincingly authors are arguing and if their conclusions can be justified by the evidence (Wallace & Wray, 2011). This assessment should be applied to our critical literature review as a whole, where we need to ensure that we provide a detailed analysis of, and commentary on, the merits and faults of the key literature in relation to our research, ensuring that our arguments and ideas are justified with appropriate evidence and in a logical manner.

(7) Distinguishes between fact and opinion

When reading and evaluating the literature, we need to distinguish clearly between facts (in other words presented information that is backed up by evidence, such as the findings from a study) and opinions (in other words subjective thoughts or beliefs about something that may be supported by an argument, but that can not necessarily be justified by evidence). Distinguishing between fact and opinion is important not only when we read and evaluate the literature, but possibly even more so when we write the review – care needs to be taken here to clearly distinguish between what has been demonstrated in previous research (facts) and how we consider this applies to our own research (opinions).

(8) Includes research that has been published since the start of the project

For most research projects, the literature search will be an early activity. Despite this early start, it is usually necessary to continue searching throughout the project's life to ensure that our knowledge of the chosen area is up to date.

(9) References all sources fully

In considering the content of your critical review, we need to reference sources clearly and completely to enable those reading your article to find the original publications without difficulty. Within this we need to ensure that references are in the exact format required for the publication. Whilst most journals detail the precise format required other guides (for example: American Psychological Association, 2005; Neville, 2010) can also be helpful.

Summary

Having drafted your literature review, it is crucial to ensure it is actually critical. To provide support in this, we conclude by offering the following questions as a summary checklist:

1. Is research that is most relevant and significant to the topic identified and included?
2. Is this research discussed and evaluated using a clear structure that will be logical to the reader?
3. Is the work of recognised experts on the topic identified and referred to?
4. Are the research aim(s) and objective(s) explicitly stated and contextualised?
5. Is research that supports and research that opposes the main arguments included, using clearly reasoned judgements?
6. Are points made logically and justified with valid argument and/or evidence?
7. Are fact and opinion distinguished clearly?
8. Is relevant research that has been published since the start of the project included?
9. Have all sources been referenced fully in the required format?

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	A critical literature review does...	A critical literature review does not...
1	identify and include the most relevant and significant research to your topic	include all research that is possibly relevant to your topic
2	discuss and evaluate this research	just summarise and describe this research
3	identify the recognised experts	fail to mention recognised experts
4	contextualise and justify your research questions	fail to justify or mention your research questions
5	consider and discuss research that supports your ideas	only consider and discuss research that supports your ideas
6	consider and discuss research that opposes your ideas	ignore research that opposes your ideas
7	justify points made logically with valid evidence	make unjustified or poorly justified points
8	distinguish between fact and opinion	mix up fact and opinion
9	include up to date relevant research	miss out recent relevant research
10	reference all items referred to fully	fail to reference all or some items referred to

Table 1. What a critical literature review does and does not.